

Embodied methods in qualitative research

Embodied research methods offer the researcher a range of ways to collect qualitative data concerned with how bodies experience and make sense of the world through corporeal engagement and action. The research method is often itself an embodied activity that uses the body - either that of the researcher and/or that of the participant - as a tool in order to access non-verbal experience and knowledge.

In this way, embodied research methods attend to the challenge of collecting and analysing bodily ways of being, and the potential of bodily action, knowledge that may be hidden. Embodied knowledge, such as learned bodily techniques or sensory responses - and the meanings that these have for the research participants' - are often internalised, tacit (that is 'taken-for' granted) or unacknowledged and pre-reflective – knowledge that is not normally consciously thought about or explicitly discussed, but rather is just 'done'. As a result, this type of knowledge can be challenging for participants to express verbally, and challenging for researchers to access and capture. In taking an embodied research approach the researcher develops ways of getting closer to the action and encouraging participants to demonstrate and communicate their bodily experience and knowledge, often using methods that are 'active', such as performing the action themselves and participating or collaborating with participants within the research context. The aim is to achieve a deeper level of empathy and understanding of the participant's experience.

To give an example of an embodied research approach, Justin Spinney (2008) took a ‘mobile ethnographic’ approach to researching how cyclists’ embodied practices and sensations while actively cycling, informed aspects of their identity formation. The embodied ethnographic method that he developed for this project involved him cycling alongside the research participants in order to get a sense of how they felt when riding, simultaneously video recording them. The resulting videos were then used within participant interviews to encourage reflection on the fleeting sensations experienced when cycling.

Embodied research approaches such as that outlined above, offer a move away from more traditional and conventional research that engages purely verbal or textual methods of knowing. This departure is itself part of a wider shift within the social sciences, arts and humanities towards acknowledging the importance of the body within social and cultural life, and an interest in embodied knowledge and action as a focus of enquiry. As such, embodied research is an innovative and developing methodological field, so the methods employed may be experimental and un-tested in nature. Rather than following pre-defined and historically configured guidelines, as more traditional research methods might, embodied methods are often developed creatively, using a combination of elements to suit the specific contexts and needs of the enquiry. For this reason, a range of case study examples are provided in this entry to give a sense of the types of methods that have been employed in existing studies, in order to help researchers new to this field develop their own approach.

Within this entry, first, the philosophical and methodological framework that foregrounds embodied research methods is outlined. Following this, some examples of the contexts in which embodied research methods have been applied are discussed. This outlines the type of data that might be collected through these methods. As previously stated, embodied research

methods do not necessarily follow preconceived guidelines, however there are certain key elements that may be useful to the researcher when developing a method suitable to their specific research context and questions. These elements can provide a potential toolbox for researchers, although this is by no means an exhaustive list. In this section on elements, some examples of existing studies that have employed them as part of their approach are highlighted. Finally, the challenges and benefits that come with using embodied research methods are summarised.

Philosophical and methodological frameworks

Underpinning embodied research is an understanding of the body as the seat of perception and meaning making, which has its philosophical basis in phenomenology, in particular, the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968). This century has seen increased interest in phenomenology philosophy, which combined with continental philosophy has acted to critique the notion of Cartesian dualism - the separation and privileging of the mind over the body. Rather a phenomenological philosophy of embodiment views the mind as part of the body, as one 'unified person' and knowledge as embodied. In this way, knowledge of the world and the self is understood to come through lived experience, that is, 'human actions upon, and involvement with the world' (Don Welton, 1999:3).

Within sociology, a 'social constructivist' approach emerging from historical and anthropological work concerning the body has also challenged Cartesian dualism. This approach positions the body as a social and cultural phenomenon, historically shaped by, and shaping, culture and social life - as opposed to a biological entity - and has established the body as a valid object of study within the social sciences and cultural studies (Entwistle, 2000:12-13). Embodied research methods respond to this new importance of the body within

modern social theory, and provide a means to research the role of bodies within social life and how social life disciplines and impacts upon these bodies. As such, they are foregrounded on notions of embodiment and 'embodied knowledge'.

Many embodied approaches have their root in anthropological study and methods have drawn upon traditional elements of ethnographic research. When researching within the 'field', anthropologists place their own bodies into the culture they are studying in order to experience that culture first hand and to closely observe how the bodies within that culture behave. Ethnographic methodological work has positioned the ethnographic research encounter as 'embodied' (Amanda Coffey, 2011). The ethnographer comes to 'know' using their whole body which is actively participating within the 'field' of study. As a result, attention is paid to the position, role and effect of the researcher's body on the research encounter and the participants. In addition, attention is paid to the bodily experience of the members of the culture being studied.

Embodied research contexts

The main contexts in which embodied research methods have been applied are those in which the body plays a fundamentally active role. These include specific disciplinary contexts where bodily 'gesture', 'practice' or 'technique' is of importance such as, but not limited to, performance, dance, sport, art and design practice and healthcare, but also specific bodily practices within the context of everyday life and culture. Examples include gardening, domestic practices, mechanical repair work, scuba diving, engagement with digital technologies and more broadly, bodily and sensory engagement with everyday objects of material culture, dress being one example. In these everyday contexts, embodied research methods often follow a broadly ethnographic approach, bringing together methods of

observation, participation and interview. In principle, however, embodied research methods could be applied to any life-world context which contains an active body.

Embodied methods are being developed radically within performance studies research.

According to Conquergood (2002), the challenge within this field has been to align analysis and action. In this context, embodied research methods that focus on active participation have enabled researchers and performance teachers to radically re-think the traditional distanced observation techniques employed in analysing and developing performance.

Within academic research in art and design, a cultural-studies turn towards 'practice-based research' has encouraged the use of embodied methods of enquiry, in which researchers draw on their own practitioner experience and expertise to inform these methods. For example, these may involve collaborative forms of design and making or hands-on workshops with the participants. The artefacts that result from these research activities may then form part of the representation of the research findings.

Within fashion and dress studies, an understanding of dress as embodied practice (Entwistle, 2000) and more recently sensory embodied practice (Chong Kwan, 2016) has encouraged attention to be paid to the lived, corporeal experience of being clothed in the social world – how the body feels when dressed, but also how it moves in space - and the implications that this has for the construction and negotiation of people's identity and positioning within the social world. Embodied methods provide a means to get closer to the lived experience of being dressed and moving around the world, and the meanings this has for the individual within social spaces.

The discipline of material culture, stemming from the anthropological study of human culture has employed embodied methods to understand how people interact with the material environment around them, how they use ‘techniques of the body’, and how people are socialised into a culture through bodily practice. This attends to the complexity of social embodied action that involves both bodily practice, technique, and objects - tools which the body employs in order to undertake specific activities. Tim Dant (2005) has defined the role of objects ‘in use’ as a form of ‘material interaction’. This approach has enabled the discipline to move beyond symbolic understandings of objects, towards an argument that objects also contribute to culture in a more fundamental and embodied way - through their active relations with the people that use them - affecting how people inhabit and make sense of the world.

Attention is also being paid to the importance of sensory perception within embodied experience. Sarah Pink has been central to developing the field of ‘Sensory ethnography’, positioning the ethnographic encounter as a sensory one, in which the ‘experiencing, knowing and emplaced body’ of the researcher connects to others within the social research context through multi-sensory as well as embodied ways (2009:35). Sensory perception is often paid attention to within embodied research methods. Moreover, following a ‘sensory turn’ in the social sciences, arts and humanities, which builds on the ‘embodied turn’, sensory perception and experience has itself become a focus of enquiry. Embodied research methods have been applied to understanding how people come to ‘make sense of’ the world through sensory perception.

In summary, embodied research methods are primarily concerned with collecting and analysing bodies in movement, bodies undertaking specific activities, techniques and

practices of the body, either on their own or using equipment, the body's engagement with material culture or the environment, embodied memory but also bodily sensation, which may be visceral, such as pain, but may also have less tangible, emotional dimensions.

When analysing the data, the researcher may be concerned with how the participant learns to behave in particular ways, how bodily practice affects the participant physically and emotionally, the particular meanings that this experience has for the subject, or in developing new ways of doing, learning or creating through the research method itself. Furthermore, when evaluating the findings, the researcher may be concerned with understanding how the participant's embodied experience and knowledge links to broader social and cultural categories such as, social and power relations, identity politics, social structures or cultural values and practices.

Key elements used within embodied research methods

There is no one type of embodied research method. Rather, in developing a method that attends to the particular research context, usually a number of elements are brought together to create a bespoke method. Examples of some of the key elements that existing studies have frequently employed are outlined below, as an indicative rather than exhaustive list. These are: participation or shared experience (when the researcher actively engages in the same activity as the other participants); audio-visual recording methods that provide a means for both researcher and participants to reflect on their embodied experience in addition to enabling visual representation of the research process and findings; innovative visualisation technologies for body mapping; performance, creative workshops and 'live' events; and interviews. Examples of studies that have utilised these elements or a combination of them, are highlighted in order to demonstrate how they might be used in practice. Linking many of

these elements is a key concern with bodily movement - how it might be attended to, incorporated into, and represented within the research process.

Participation/shared experience

Although not essential, central to many embodied research projects is the participation of the researcher in the activity being studied. The impetus to undertake a research project may initiate from the researchers own real-life experience of an embodied activity. The element of researcher participation is perhaps the most explicit form of embodied method as it exemplifies the notion of 'research as action' engaging both the body of the researcher and that of the participant(s) in shared experience and collaborative research. A number of benefits can potentially arise from incorporating this element. First, the researcher can collect and analyse their own experience so that it contributes to the body of research data, using an auto-ethnographic approach. This can then be compared to the experience of other participants to explore commonalities and differences. Second, it enables the researcher to more fully empathise with the bodily experience being studied. Undertaking an activity together can help to forge a sense of trust between researcher and participant, putting the participant at ease through the sense that they will be understood. A feeling of trust may also encourage the participant to express themselves more freely during the research encounter. Furthermore, creating a shared experience between researcher and participant challenges the traditional hierarchy between the observer (researcher) and the observed (subject) which has positive ethical implications for the construction of knowledge which is made together, rather than purely imposed by the researcher. This acknowledges the agency of the participants. Pink argues that: 'Learning to sense and make meanings as others do thus involves us not simply observing what they do, but learning how to use all our senses and to participate in *their* worlds, on the terms of their embodied understandings' (2009:72).

Tomie Hanh (2007), in her ethnography of the Japanese dance form, Nihon Buyo, explored the link between embodied learning of the dance with the accumulation of cultural knowledge and identity. Her research used participation in the lessons to reflect upon her own embodied knowledge and learning as a student of Nihon Buyo.

Audio-visual recording

Embodied research methods are usually concerned with observing and capturing aspects of bodies in movement, whether that is the participants' bodies or the researchers own body (if they are themselves participating in the activity). Methods of recording and reflecting upon this movement in analysis are required and video provides a useful tool for capturing bodies in motion.

The researcher can film the embodied activities or performances of the participants for analysis at a later date. The video can also be used to 'remember' the experience of the action and to elicit discussion with the participants during post activity interviews. Watching the film can re-engage the viewer back into the sensory experience and feelings of the original activity and environment. The ability to pause the video and think about fleeting moments during the experience can enable detailed analysis of micro gestures and movements, that might otherwise 'get lost' in the flow of the action. Stephanie Merchant (2011) has reflected on the benefits of integrating sound, videography and 'audiencing' into the research process in order to study the 'unrepresentable' sensory shifts experienced when scuba diving. She utilised underwater audio-visual recordings of dives in which she participated to elicit a group discussion with the other divers, remembering and comparing the minor embodied details, sensations, feelings, and thoughts that the divers experienced during the dive. The

footage and the resulting discussion formed a body of data that was then analysed by the researcher. When used, film can be included with the written-up findings of the research or still images can be taken from the video to illustrate these, a method that Tim Dant (2010) used in his detailed study of the gesture, sensory and emotional dimensions involved in mechanical car repair work. This enabled him to compare the work of mass production with that of repair, aligning the latter with a Marxist conception of human creative practice.

Taking an embodied research approach encourages the creative application of video for both data collection and analysis. Pink (2009), when researching identity (gender) construction within the sensory home, employed hand-held video as a means of eliciting demonstrations from her participants of their cleaning practices during walk-around tours of their domestic spaces. Here the participants were encouraged to 'show' as well as 'tell' identity stories about their spaces, how they 'sensed' and behaved within them, for the 'film'.

Innovative visualisation technologies

Not all embodied research methods involve active participation from the researcher. The research may be concerned with mapping experience and sensation onto the body.

When paying attention to internalised aspects of a participant's bodily experience that cannot be easily reproduced or observed by the researcher, a dancer's pain for example, other methods may be required, such as innovative visualisation technologies. In Jen Tarr and Helen Thomas' study of dancer's pain and injury, body scanning technology was combined with questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in order to help the dancers to more effectively locate and express the difference between bodily pain and injury – experiences that dancers would 'frequently block from conscious perception' (Tarr and Thomas, 2013:np).

Performance, creative workshops and 'live' events

Within practice based disciplines (such as teaching, acting, dance, art and design), performance, creative workshops and 'live' events have been used as sites of meaning-making, where the event itself is the embodied method of knowledge production. This rests on an understanding of performance and creative practice as embodied practices.

Performance, workshops and 'live' events can provide a research space in which collaborative making and doing can be combined with active discussion and reflection on the research process.

Donatella Barbieri (2007) has considered how a combination of interdisciplinary 'live' methods can be used to explore how her teaching practice for performance costume design might be re-configured, proposing that the performing body - the performers physical understandings of how their bodies move within the rehearsal and performance space - can be engaged as the 'primary source' in the creative process of costume design. This method seeks to unite the moving body with imagination, emotion, materiality and environment in a holistic way that radically rethinks the traditional means of research, knowing and creation in relation to costume design. This study reflects upon a series of workshops where performers were encouraged to engage in open 'play', physically exploring the boundaries of their bodies through movement exercises within the rehearsal room, making and then interacting with built objects, structures and masks in addition to responding to photographs which led to further drawing and moving workshops. This demonstrates the potential for embodied methods to be combined in innovative and fluid ways where the research process unfolds and is in a continual process of development and re-development in response to the live action.

Practice based research within fashion and dress studies, emerging from material culture and sustainability approaches as well as design practice are developing new 'live' methods of engaging the participants and public in embodied research methods as part of the research process. This builds on an understanding of worn dress and fashion design as an embodied practice. When researching the relationship people have with their dress, design workshops, for example, enable exploration of the 'live' and multi-sensory material properties of clothing (see Woodward, 2015). These can be combined with more traditional methods of object analysis and interviews. Exhibitions also offer a space in which the researcher can engage the museum audience in embodied practices as a site of knowledge creation. Here, the audience can be invited to physically engage with the dress items, trying them on and reflecting on or recording the sensory experience of wearing these items - how they feel on the body, affect their movements or change their body's sensory dimensions.

Interviews

Frequently within existing research projects that take an embodied research approach, traditional forms of interview and focus groups are employed as one of a combination of methods to further explore how participants make sense of the embodied activity that is being researched. This was evidenced in a number of the previously aforementioned studies. Discussion invites reflection on bodily action and can add depth to observations, verbalising understandings of the actions of the body that the participant has, but which are not easily observable. While the researcher may be able to observe reactions and bodily action, they may not interpret the significance and meanings of this in the same way as the participant, so interviews enable this tension to be explored. In this way interviews help to unite action, thought and imagination within the embodied research process.

Research interviews have themselves been positioned as a form of embodied communication or mutual construction of meaning that happens between two active bodies within the interview event (see Ellingson, 2018). This necessitates reflection by the researcher on the bodily subjectivities of themselves and the participant and how this affects the knowledge that comes from the research. The way that the participant's body behaves during the interview may also be attended to in the analysis. Their demeanour, gesture and facial expressions can provide clues to sensory and emotional reactions to the topics under discussion, knowledge and feelings that the participant may find difficult to express verbally.

Challenges

Evidently, there are a number of challenges posed when using embodied research methods. By their nature embodied practices involve movement that may be difficult to capture, reflect upon and represent due to the pace of the activity or the environment in which they occur, a choreographed dance, cycling or scuba diving for example. Pausing the action could interrupt the flow and change the dynamics and meaning of the activity for the participants, which has implications for the validity of the research findings. Furthermore, if the researcher is participating in the activity they are studying, then the problem of how to simultaneously observe or reflect on the experience arises. As discussed, the use of audio-visual recording can provide a solution, but may require the researcher to learn new technical skills, engage with sophisticated equipment or work with experienced technicians in order to capture the data that they need successfully in challenging environments. However, new multi-media and digital technologies such as virtual reality for example, may in the future, provide innovative solutions to the challenge of how to capture and represent embodied action, and contribute to the further development of creative embodied research methods.

Many projects that incorporate embodied research methods take a multi-method approach resulting in rich but complex sets of data, such as film, interviews, artefacts, which require the researcher to develop approaches to analysing the data holistically. Data collected through embodied research methods can relate to fleeting and ephemeral experience, and as a result is difficult to express and represent verbally and textually. Representing the types of embodied knowledge, that is practices, techniques or types of sensory perception, that these research methods collect may require developing a specific language or multimedia approach that can express these adequately to particular audiences within specific contexts (see Spatz, 2017). Textual language may need to draw upon different forms such as technical terminology, ethnographic accounts, narratives, creative writing, interview data or a combination of forms. It is also important to reflect upon how this language has been constructed, as it may relate to specific disciplines, for example dance, or to particular cultural contexts that may be based on inherent assumptions and political values around how certain types of knowledge is valued and hierarchically structured. For example, when investigating sensory experience, western perception is organised within a system of five senses where vision is privileged over the other senses, but this differs across cultures. Alternative means of representation to textual accounts may be appropriate. As discussed, these might include audio-visual recordings (photography and video), or live performances, events or exhibitions.

As with all research involving people, it is vital to consider the ethical and safeguarding implications of the methods used and the resulting data. The participants must be fully informed of the research methods and consent gained for their participation. The storage and dissemination of any resulting data, particularly if it enables the identification of participants - such as video - must be discussed and consent agreed with the participants prior to the

research commencing. As embodied research is often a creative and an evolving process, it is important to keep reflecting on the ethical issues throughout the research process as new and unexpected issues may arise.

Benefits

Embodied research methods offer the researcher a means to study in depth and detail aspects of bodily experience that may not emerge through traditional methods of enquiry. They can be incorporated into traditional experiential methods such as interviews or focus groups in order to produce rich data that gets closer to the actual experience of the participants, combining talk with action. Furthermore, embodied research methods, due to the nature of them being 'research in action' have the potential to be applied to their contexts and to solutions for problems with an immediacy that other more traditional methods may not.

Ethically these methods, due to their often collaborative and 'open' nature can challenge the power structures inherent in more traditional research methods, providing the participants with more agency over the research process and the types of knowledge that emerge. For the researcher, by paying close attention to the bodies of the participants or through participating in the action themselves, a closer empathy with the participants is encouraged. In accessing non-verbal experience embodied methods can give a 'voice' to marginalised groups, displaced people say, who may not have the linguistic knowledge or capital required to tell the researcher about their experience through traditional experiential methods.

More broadly, embodied research methods offer a grounded and radically creative door to expanding the field of qualitative research within many disciplines, in innovative ways,

posing questions around what 'knowing' is, how we come to know, what we might come know, and how we might represent that knowledge.

Dr. Sara Chong Kwan

Further Readings

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